

## Understanding scientific plant names

IF YOU THINK THAT THE SCIENTIFIC NAMES of plants are really tough to remember, you're quite right. But they are also technical, precise, and once you get the hang of them, really quite helpful when you are trying to identify a new plant as they give you place to start.

Many of those long jawbreakers have Latin roots but there is some Greek in there as well. To add to the confusion, some horticulturists refer to them as botanical names, and still others call them epithets. Call them what you want, the important part is that these names are internationally recognized. So while many plants may have several common names, each has only one scientific name. For example, consider the familiar blueweed that grows in poor soil and along roadsides. In the New England states it is more commonly known as viper's bugloss. However, on both sides of the border it is immediately recognized by its scientific name, *Echium vulgare*.

Most often, the scientific name of the plant, in spite of its fancy sound, refers to a specific characteristic or trait. *Echinops*, the globe thistle, means "like a hedgehog". *Campanula*, the bell flower, derives from *campana* or bell. It is as simple as that... or not, depending on the plant. Take lambsquarters for example. It's easy to see how this plant picked up its common name. When in bloom, the combination of white flowers twitching in a light breeze can easily bring to mind the twitching of a lamb's tail, hence lambsquarters. But, what looks like the back end of a sheep to some appeared quite differently to a Greek farmer. He looked at the leaves and saw a goose foot. So here we go: goose = *cheno*, foot = *podium*, and white = *album*. The scientific name is *Chenopodium album*.

If that's all Greek to you, take heart. Once you have learned some of the more common terms, especially the colours, it becomes easier to associate the scientific name with the plant. For example *purpurea* is Latin for purple (you could have guessed it). How about the Latin word *giganteum*, meaning giant of course. Or *compositae*, meaning composite. This refers to a flower having two types of petals – daisies, blanket flowers, asters, and the like. Knowing a few of the more commonly used terms can help you to identify plants – and it will impress your gardening friends!

The best way to get started is to get yourself a good plant identification book that lists plants by both their common names and their scientific name, such as *Taylor's Encyclopedia of Gardening* (published by Houghton Mifflin) or *The Gardener's Encyclopedia of Plants and Flowers* (published by Dorling-Kindersley) and before you know it you'll be able to recognize those scientific names like an expert.